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HOW TO REFORM ENGLISH SPELLING.

AMONG the questions current in the sphere of English studies is that of English orthography. By reason of its close connection with orthoepy, and from the extremely composite structure of our language, the question is one of no little difficulty, and should elicit the most patient attention of English students. While free to confess that we are among the advocates of this reform, it will be our aim to give due weight to all valid objections, and thus avoid those extreme deliverances by reason of which the cause of English spelling has been made to suffer.

"In every written language," says Müller, "a reform of spelling is sooner or later inevitable." To this may be added the vigorous language of Whitney: "Of all spellings in the world, the English is the most absurd." It would follow from these high authorities that a reform of English orthography is especially inevitable and desirable. If inquiry be made as to the more particular reason of this need, the answer is apparent and vital to the discussion before us. It is found in the principle that in all languages the relation of sounds to signs should be close and uniformly correspondent. As far as possible, they should answer to each other at every successive point of structure. When such a principle as this is applied in English, it is seen that the proportion of sounds to signs is so unequal, and their adjustment so irregular, that the relation is fortuitous rather than philosophic. There is no fixed law on which a permanent orthographic system can be founded.

The general linguistic principle, already stated, may be thus specified: Every sound must be represented by a distinct sign. No sound must be represented by more than one sign. Applying these criteria to the existing English alphabet as related to English spelling, it is seen that in each of them there is striking irregularity and a consequent call for revision. Our alphabet is

made up of forty-three sounds, while having but twenty-six signs. Strictly speaking, it has but twenty-three signs. Indeed, the absolutely fixed letters of our alphabet—letters true alike to eye and ear—have been reduced by some philologists to eight. Here, at the outset, is great disproportion. The same sign is obliged to do double duty, and often more than that, in its representation of different sounds, *e. g.* :

head,	rough,	height,
seat,	plough,	sleigh.
	through,	

Still further, the cases are numberless where the second criterion is violated, and many different signs are used to represent the same sound. There is no point within the area of English spelling where the confusion is worse confounded than here. In such words as *flute, deuce, news, tour, sluice*, there are seen to be for the same sound no fewer than five distinct signs where the theory requires but one, and where with each change of sign the complexity is increased. In the present system there is no assignable limit to such variations, and each man becomes, in a sense, his own law and guide.

Enough has been said to show that, whatever the reform of our spelling may be, there is an urgent need of some kind of revision. Our English orthography could not be much more unsettled and misleading than it is. Almost any change would be a change for the better; and, if we judge aright, the present era is propitious for the serious consideration of the best methods of reform. Granted that the reform is desirable; the special question is, Is it feasible? At this point hosts of investigators arise, each with his special theory and procedure. It is here that the discussion must turn, and enlightenment is needed.

It is not our purpose to give in detail the various phonic, pictorial, and phonetic systems that have been proposed as a solution of the problem in question, or to show in what particulars such men as Pitman and Leigh differ with one another. The special need, from the first, has been greater uniformity of method. There has been less danger from the absence of interest on the part of scholars and the people than from the wild variety of views among those who have been one as to the urgent need and final purpose of reform. Some one definite and feasible scheme must be offered to the judgment of the people. Up to a recent period no such unanimity of plan existed.

Opinion has varied, for example, between the minimum number of signs, at thirty-six, and the maximum number, at forty-four. Such a difference is too wide to commend itself to critical or even to common minds. As Professor Lounsbury expresses it: "When authority enough of the whole body of educated men can be collected to consent to the introduction of a reformed orthography, its triumph will have been achieved." These diversities of view have been fast disappearing, and common ground may now be said to have been reached.

At a recent meeting of the English Spelling Reform Association, in London, this unifying of plans was the chief topic of discussion. Sharp distinctions were made for the first time between essential and non-essential conditions. Among the twenty-seven schemes proposed, a severe eliminating process selected seven as test examples of feasible plans. In order still further to show the necessity of unity, the essential conditions of the seven methods were reduced to two. At this point unity appears in alphabetical systems, and light breaks over the entire province of reform. The one method of reform proposed may be termed the Phonetic or Ideal, as distinct from the present Historical or Anti-Phonetic System. It is that method recently adopted in joint action by the Philological Society of England and the American Philological Association. It expresses the latest and best result of the reform movement in England and America, and is the only method to which this paper refers. Much of the random discussion of the day on spelling reform seems to be conducted in utter ignorance of this method proposed to us by the two most distinguished philological bodies of the English world. This method is based on the exact correspondence of sounds and signs. The Phonetic alphabet adopted by the Spelling Reform Association, in Baltimore, in 1877, presents it in feasible form. Its principles are:

1. There are eighteen Roman letters that commonly represent in English nearly the same elementary sounds that they represented in Latin: *a* (*father*), *b*, *c* (*k*, *g*), *d*, *e* (*met*), *f*, *g* (*go*), *h*, *i* (*pick*), *l*, *m*, *n*, *o* (*go*), *p*, *r*, *s* (*so*), *t*, *u* (*full*).
2. The consonant sounds represented in Latin by *i* and *u* are now represented by *y* and *w*, and the sounds corresponding to *f* and *s* are now represented by *v* and *z*.
3. There are three short vowels unknown to the early Romans, which are without proper representatives in English, those in *fat*, *not*, *but*.
4. There are five elementary consonants represented by digraphs—*th* (*thin*), *th*=*dh* (*then*), *sh* (*she*), *zh* (*azure*), *ng* (*sing*), also, *ch* (*church*), *g* (*j*).

It seems best to follow the Latin in the use of a single sign for a short vowel and its long sound, distinguishing them, when necessary, by a diacritical mark. The three vowels in *fat*, *not*, *but*, need new letters, and for these it is recommended to try some modification of these vowels. For the consonants represented by digraphs (*th*, etc.), new letters are desirable but not essential. With this alphabet, as Professor March says, "the English language can be spelled according to its new sounds." Professor Scott, of New York, writes:

"After an examination of several hundred proposed alphabets,—good, bad, indifferent, and dreadful,—I am prepared to declare this alphabet in all respects the simplest, most accurate, and least revolutionary of all systems founded on the Roman alphabet."

It is essential to understand that this proposed method is meant to be gradual in its application. There are many, indeed, who will never advocate a change of the present system of spelling, simply because it is called historical and has the sanction of age. But even to those who are less conservative and are open to conviction, this method is commended only for gradual application. While in the schools the alphabet itself should be adopted and used, the wiser procedure among the people is that of a reserved progress ever looking toward final and full application. The alphabet itself has been prepared on this principle of wise concession, as Whitney in his report (1876) clearly intimates. The gradual manner in which this method is to be applied by the people may well be illustrated in noting the different stages that have been marked out, leading us from the simplest beginnings to the complete use of the phonetic alphabet. Thus:

1. Use simplified forms in standard dictionaries — *program*, *favor*, etc.
2. Use the two words — *tho*, *thru*.
3. Use the ten words — *tho*, *thru*, *gard*, *catalog*, *ar*, *giv*, *liv*, *hav*, *definit*, *wisht*.
4. Use the five rules :
 - a. Omit *a* from the digraf *ea* when pronounced as *e* short — *hed*, *helth*, etc.
 - b. Omit silent final *e* after a short vowel — *hav*, *giv*, etc.
 - c. Write *f* for *ph* in such words as *fantom*, *alfabet*, etc.
 - d. When a word ends with a double letter omit the last — *clif*, etc.
 - e. Change *ed* final to *t* where it has the *t* sound — *lasht*, *fixt*, etc.
5. Use the joint rules for amended spellings.

These rules are twenty-four in number, and may be said to prepare the way for the adoption of the perfected system as based on the phonetic alphabet. They are termed by those who framed them "the basis of a scheme of partial reform." Certainly they have greatly erred who have supposed that the proposed reform of English spelling runs abruptly and violently athwart all that has traditionally existed. The following are substantially the joint rules :

1. Drop silent *e* when phonetically useless — *bronz*, *engin*, etc.
2. Drop *a* from *ea* having the sound of *e* — *fether*, etc.
3. For *beauty*, use the old *benty*.
4. Drop *o* from *eo* having the sound of *e* — *lepard*, etc.
5. Drop *i* in *parliament*.
6. For *o* having the sound of *u* in *but*, write *u* — *abuv*, *sum*, etc.
7. Drop *o* from *ou* having the sound of *u* — *nurish*, etc.
8. Drop silent *u* after *g* before *a*, and in native English words — *gard*, *gest*.
9. Drop final *ue* in *catalog*, etc.
10. Spell *rhyme*, *rime*.
11. Double consonants may be simplified — *od*, *eb*, etc.
12. Drop silent *b* in *bom*, *det*, *lim*, etc.
13. Change *c* back to *s* in *sinder*, *pens*, etc.
14. Drop the *h* of *ch* in *coler*, *scool*, etc.
15. Change *d* and *ed* final to *t* when so pronounced — *crost*, etc. Not so when the *e* affects the preceding sound — *chafed*, etc.
16. Drop *g* in *fein*, etc.
17. Drop *h* in *gost*, etc.
18. Drop *l* in *could* — *coud*.
19. Drop *p* in *receipt* — *receit*.
20. Drop *s* in *aisle* — *aile*, etc.
21. Drop *c* in *scent* — *sent*.
22. Drop *t* in *catch*, etc.
23. Drop *w* in *whole* — *hole*.
24. Write *f* for *ph* — *filosofy*, etc.

In these five collections of rules for gradual spelling reform, it will be noted that only such changes are advised as are within reach of every one at all desirous to simplify his orthography. No new letters are needed for the reader, and no new types for the printer. It is all feasible, and if adopted up to this limit would vastly improve our spelling.

Omitting many of the minor considerations, attention will be directed to two or three of the more important positions held by those who have discussed the question on either side. The economical argument has reference to the saving of time, labor,

and expense, as affecting the author, printer, publisher, teacher, learner, and reader. In the memorial presented to Congress by the American Philological Association (1878) in behalf of this reform, the advantage of economy is the first one urged. To the same effect Müller, in the "Fortnightly Review," says: "Behind these reformers there is a motive power which has been hardly taken into account. I mean the misery endured by millions of children at school, who might learn in one year what they now require four or five years to learn." Professor March has taken special pains to enlighten the public on this practical view of the question. The law of the present era is that of economy. It applies in language and literature as well as in trade. Other things being equal, that is the best method which is the most direct and practical. The reform of English spelling stands on this basis. It insists upon retaining only that part of the word which is essential to it as it strikes the ear. It presses this principle with special emphasis at present in that the bounds of knowledge are so widening, and the demands upon the learner so increasing, that not a needless hour should be given to the mastery of the elements of speech. No substantial reply has as yet been made to this argument, nothing to disprove the fact that this immense loss of means and energy is mainly due to the existing system of orthography. Archbishop Trench, who stands almost alone in England as a distinguished advocate of the present spelling, contents himself with the assertion that this saving is exaggerated; that the gains are more apparent than real, and are offset by corresponding losses, such as that of discrimination of words meaning differently and yet pronounced alike—rain, reign, rein. Of these assertions, the last only has any validity as an argument, and it has been fully answered by Müller and others. If in the rapidity of oral speech these words of similar sound are accurately distinguished in meaning, such accuracy would be even greater as to the written word on the page before the eye and interpreted by the context. If, despite this, any difficulty of distinction should arise, it is easily removed by a resort to synonymous terms. This argument from economy still holds, nor is it to be interpreted as a merely mercenary one for selfish ends. The reduction of cost is but trifling compared with the husbandry of time and effort that it secures. Economy in this direction means enlarged personal power; it means the more rapid and health-

ful growth of English civilization, and through that agency the more speedy moral conquest of the world.

In the present so-called system there is, as we have seen, no class of principles so fixed and so uniformly applicable that they can be accepted as safe and so applied. Hence the enormous waste indicated. Hence the startling statistics on this subject in English-speaking countries. Dr. Morell says that of 1972 failures in the Civil-service examinations in England, 1866 were in spelling. It has been certified that twenty-five per cent. of the teachers in State schools are deficient in this particular. Mr. Jones, of Liverpool, in his report on national education, confirms these statements. If we descend from the educated to the illiterate, the facts are all the more suggestive.

It is just here that the special difficulty of English to foreigners is apparent. The more intelligent among them tell us, and justly, that there is no logic or philosophy in our language as at present spelled, no reliable code of laws by which the learner may be guided. No sooner is the pupil called to apply one principle than he is obliged to ignore it in the application of another, and so on through an endless series of contradictions. Müller sees but one advantage in all this, as he sarcastically remarks: "A child accustomed to believe that *though* is *tho* and that *through* is *throo*, would afterward believe anything." He traces English orthodoxy to this source, the instant acceptance of the mysterious. President White, of Cornell, is therefore right in calling our system of spelling "the most illogical the world has ever seen." There is no sense or reason in it to win the confidence of thinking men. Each one is his own guide. It is an open question, whether incorrect spelling should be regarded as discreditable. In the average class of an American college, there is but a very small proportion of accurate spellers. Here is one of the strongest arguments for the reform as proposed, and one not as yet answered. The system offered is consistent and applicable, based on well-established phonetic principles, and, with few exceptions, it is the one system that unifies the alphabet by the coördination of signs and sounds. By this it is not meant that the phonetic alphabet secures an absolute agreement of the written and the spoken. This would be impossible; the human voice is greater in variety than any written alphabet can be. But these differences can be reduced to a minimum. The present system ignores any such attempt. The proposed method

attempts it, and substantially succeeds. When Trench declares that phonetic spelling is impossible because it requires "a reconstruction of the alphabet," he has in mind a complete and faultless reconstruction. No one contends for this. Though no system of spelling can fully adjust sound to sign, the phonetic system is the most consistent in that it approximately secures it. The reform is rational as well as economic. Among opposing arguments there are two deserving of notice.

First. The proposed system impairs the historical and etymological characters of the language. This is a favorite argument with Trench. The reader will find it fully met by Müller in the "Fortnightly Review." The substance of the refutation is this: That it is simply begging the question to call the present system of spelling historical and etymological, to the exclusion of other systems. Every scholar of First and Middle English knows that the present system is comparatively modern or unhistorical; that, if we were to spell with strict historical accuracy, we would spell in the line of the system proposed, as we find it in the writings of Orm, Chaucer, and Spenser. The fact is, phonetic spelling in some form is nothing new in English. The etymological argument is closely connected with this, and is equally misleading. It proceeds on the assumption—proved by Hadley and others to be false—that our present spelling is out and out etymological. Here again a simple reference to early English is sufficient. In 1880 the Philological Society of England appointed a committee to present a list of words "in which etymology or history is obscured or falsified by the present spelling." Dr. Murray, of London, finds thousands of such. In our words, lord, woman, orchard, and righteousness, what guide is there as to etymology, to the first English forms—hlâford, wîfman, ort-gæard, and riht-wîsnes? The argument proves too much. Even conceding the principle, it may be said on behalf of the proposed system that all necessary etymological knowledge could be gained by the scholar through study and reference, while to the common classes it would be a matter neither of necessity nor of interest. In a word, the argument turns upon itself. The phonetic method is the more historical of the two, and obliges the learner to return at once to the oldest forms of the language, in the days of Alfred and Layamen, to discern the real sources and historical sequence of present English speech.

Second. The more formidable objection is based on the uncertainty of English pronunciation. Trench, in his last edition of "English, Past and Present," renews the attack from this quarter. It runs as follows: When we are told to spell as we pronounce, it is asked, How do we pronounce? "It is an assumption," he says, "that all men pronounce all words alike, or agree as to the sound." This is correct. As a fact, men do not pronounce alike. Pronunciation itself is changing, and there is no stable basis. As to this objection, it is well not to be too dogmatic. The present system of spelling involves this same difficulty — in lesser measure, indeed, but still involves it. It includes it in so far as to make this argument comparatively invalid as adduced against the reform. Under any system of spelling in a spoken language, the element of change will be potent, and nowhere more so than in the departments of orthoepy and orthography. As Müller strongly insists, the very reason of the present variety of pronunciation, and consequent variety of spelling, is found in the looseness of the existing system, where the same sounds can be represented in so many different ways. He argues, justly, that if from childhood we were trained to the use of a consistent phonetic alphabet, these present variations would not exist, because they could not. Wiclif would not be spelled twenty-eight ways, but one way. The fact that with the same phonetic alphabet the different advocates of reform will write and spell the same word differently, is an anomaly due to the traditional looseness in which they have been trained; to the necessary imperfections of any ideal system, and often to the total depravity of those who will do as they please. As Müller asks, "What Scotchman would admit that his pronunciation was faulty?" It is pertinent here to add, alike by way of refutation and positive argument, that the general application of the phonetic method would do more than any other one thing to coördinate pronunciation and orthography.

The present status of the reform is substantially encouraging. As to the active agencies at work, the reader may be referred to the "Circular (No. 7, 1880) of the Bureau of Education at Washington," officially sanctioning the movement; to the successive reports issued by the English and American associations; to the increasing number of State, national, and international conventions in its behalf; to definite local legisla-

tion in England and in America—as in Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania; to the favorable attitude of the press in many parts of the country; to the spirit of inquiry as to its feasibility; and to its actual introduction into some of the elementary schools. As to the literature it has evoked, this itself would constitute a library. Eminent scholars have written treatises and prepared manuals, while valuable articles may be found in nearly all of the leading periodicals of this nation and England.

Most of the highest English and American names in philology have expressed themselves in favor of spelling-reform as defined in the present paper. This fact in itself raises the question at once to the level of a great philological problem. Nothing could be more false than to call it the scheme of a few interested specialists for speculative ends. In fact, the sanctions are so high and numerous that, if adduced in any other scheme of reform, they would be accepted as final, and warrant a fair trial. Here are such names as Skeat, Sayce, Müller, Sweet, Morris, March, Child, Whitney, Angus, and Earle. To such a catalogue might be added the names of scores of others, such as Harkness, Lounsbury, Garnett, Price, Scott, Corson, Harrison, White, Seelye, and Carter. Such a cause need not go begging, but justifies a greater boldness than has yet been exhibited in its defense and propagation. These exponents believe the reform to be desirable. They deem it feasible, and have submitted a definite method, first in its full form, as based on a phonetic alphabet, and then in a modified form, as based on a collection of amended spellings. At this point their function rests. The intelligent public, in unison with the great body of educators, are asked to accept and apply it in a way sufficiently honest, and for a time sufficiently long, to test its asserted feasibility. The scheme is based on popular approval and general usage as the condition of its success. This desire to coöperate is growing, and is the most hopeful thing in the present outlook.

The main province of the reform must be in the primary schools. It is not expected that the new method is to be wholly substituted for the old by the great body of our adult population. All that is asked of such is, that they give the proposal candid discussion; that, as far as possible, they apply the modified system, and do nothing to impede those who are aiming to

insure its full application in our common educational system. It is only in the schools that the full method can be tested by those who have not first to unlearn an old system, but who come to it without bias or bigotry. Hence, the wisdom of such manuals for schools as those of Dr. Vickroy and Professor March. The child must be met as he begins to learn the English alphabet in order to read and spell. On this method it would require but a few generations to displace the old by the new. So as to journalism, much may be done. The Adams & Lyon Publishing Company, of Chicago, have done good service here. The Missouri Press Association at Sedalia (May, 1880) set an example to all editorial bodies when they resolved that they "heartily sympathized with the earnest efforts to simplify English spelling," and would "aid and encourage one another to begin and make such gradual changes as are recommended." The "Home Journal" of New York has seconded this action, while our best journals have admitted more or less of change by way of trial. A corporate press association, as suggested by the "Utica Herald," would be an invaluable auxiliary. It is interesting to note, in reference to our two standard dictionaries, that Noah Webster was one of the pioneer reformers, and that in the successive editions of Worcester and Webster alike, amended spellings are more and more numerous. It is also gratifying that Dr. Murray, of London, the editor-in-chief of the great Historical English Dictionary, now preparing, is one of the vice-presidents of the Reform Association. Recent American critics have called attention to the need of a journal of popular philology. The prospectus of such a journal lies before us, and the list of its projectors corresponds very suggestively with the list of spelling reformers, while among its statements we read: "It is proposed to adopt as the standard of orthography that recommended by the Philological Associations of England and America."

The reform of our spelling is a necessity. The method proposed is a vast improvement upon the present one, and is practicable. The weight of scholarly authority is on its side. Its outlook is promising. As a gradual and general reform it finds its present need to be actual introduction in schools, partial use by journalists, and the intelligent study of the people. Some essential reform of English spelling is sure to come, and possibly within the experience of those now living. The greatest Englishman of the present century, Mr. Gladstone, tells us that if he

were younger he would lead the movement, while England's Poet Laureate is on its official boards. It is an eminently economical and rational movement, projected partly by the very necessities of language, and partly by popular needs. No reform of modern times can present so goodly a list of advocates, and while by no means unattended with objections and difficulties, it is so substantially valid and judicious as to be safely commended to the schools for immediate adoption, and to all English-speaking people for intelligent discussion and approval.

T. W. HUNT.